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## **LIFE AT THE EDGE: BEYOND THE GREAT BARRIER**

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**“Fear is the great barrier to human growth.” —Robert A. Monroe**

Under normal conditions, for most of us, most of the time, death is what happens to other, less fortunate people; or else, if it is acknowledged as our own fate, it is still too easily dismissed as something so far in the distant future as to be unworthy of serious contemplation in the present. But such robust psychological defenses will suddenly crumble when events seemingly beyond our control force us to the edge, to gaze into the frightening abyss below.

With the coronavirus pandemic, we are collectively holding hands at the edge. If it is not our own physical death that frightens us, it is the loss of our habitual illusions of safety and security that threatens to upend our sense of ourselves: so-called “ego death.” That the entire planet, or at least all of human civilization, now shudders at the brink, is itself highly significant. This ubiquity—the pan (Greek: all) in “pandemic”—may prove to be a vital clue to the deeper meaning of these distressing events. I’ll have more to say about this possibility below.

As an individual, I came to my personal edge about a year and a half ago, when I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. My responsiveness to treatment has hit the pause button on the dire prognosis, but there is currently no cure. Meanwhile, I have been granted the luxury of time to ponder my fate. It is my hope that my thoughts about my own condition may offer some encouragement and hope as we together face the current global crisis.

On reflection, neither the diagnosis nor the prognosis was surprising or shocking. Why? I wondered. The answer that came was: because I already knew. Or rather, something in me knew, and had been sending me warnings in the form of disturbing dreams and other signs.

Carl Jung would have called this “something” the unconscious; to the ancient Greeks, it was the daimon, the inner guardian or guide who knows our fate; whereas Monroe program attendees are taught methods of accessing “Guidance” or “The Inner Self Helper” (ISH). Call it what you will, there is an inner source of information and knowledge that displays greater intelligence and creativity than “I” do. And maybe even greater wisdom, too. This is good to know!

Then I noticed something significant: I was not afraid to die. It was as if I skipped over the first four stages of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's first four stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, and depression—and gone right to acceptance. Sure, I was still apprehensive about certain things, like the possible side effects of the medications and my ability in the meantime to lead as “normal” a life as possible. Not to mention the thought of winding up in a hospital in my final days, as I had seen with so many of my relatives, including my mother and father. But of death itself I had no fear. What was the reason for this?

Every participant in a Monroe program is asked to entertain the hypothesis: that, in Bob's famous phrase, “I am more than my physical body.” What struck me is that no matter how far back I went in my memories, I couldn't locate a time in my life that I hadn't accepted this as true. It was, for me—as I believe it is for everyone else, until and unless it is occluded by cultural conditioning—an instinctive conviction, with me since birth. And perhaps before.

Plato said that all true knowing is but remembering. This is indeed also part of the message that Bob brought back from his ultimate journey to the source of creation, the Emitter: “There is no teacher, there is no student/There is only remembering.” Yet, I had never truly forgotten.

I detected this principle in my early childhood experiences of rapture in the presence of the wonders of the natural world, as well as in my fascination with the mysterious inner world of my own dreams and fantasies. Before I could articulate it in so many words, there seemed to me a deeper, hidden dimension of reality to which I, too, somehow belonged. Or, as Lewis Spence, put it, that everything is “secretly linked together by invisible bonds.”

Some of my dreams and reveries took me on mysterious journeys to places of haunting beauty and inexpressible wonder, where I experienced feelings of comradeship, belonging, and love, and igniting in me a great nostalgia and an intense, inchoate longing; while others were dark, almost intolerably frightening nightmares of dungeons, monstrous serpents, and fire pits of human (child) sacrifice. Yet, I somehow sensed that both sides were different masks worn by the same actor, deriving their power from a common source: that which William James simply dubbed “the MORE,” or in Carl Jung's preferred phrase, the Anima Mundi, the world soul.

Many years later, in college, what captured my attention and ignited my passion was a subject called philosophy, or “the love of wisdom,” whose most illustrious exponent, Socrates, declared that “philosophy, when practiced in the proper manner, is practice for dying and death.”

For Socrates, the reality of the invisible dimension, and its inseparable link to earthly life, was a core principle. To live consciously and conscientiously—to care for soul, as he put it—was to accept that **death was not the opposite of life, but rather, its intimate companion**, its complement and completion. Indeed, as James Hillman points out, to the Greeks, life and

death were regarded as siblings: “The brotherhood of Zeus and Hades says that the upper and lower worlds are the same; only the perspectives differ.”

My subsequent academic research and personal explorations into these complementary perspectives led me back to my childhood preoccupations, and to a place called the Monroe Institute, where participants learn that the difference between “Here” and “There” is merely a change in the focus of our attention.

The essential mystical realization is that the tensions of reality are paradoxically the very source of its dynamic wholeness. As Heraclitus said (and as Bob’s ROTE from the Emitter poetically echoes), “To live is to die, to be awake is to sleep, to be young is to be old, for the one flows into the other, and the process is capable of being reversed.”

This quite sudden, unexpected reversal, or what the Greeks called enantiodromia, is what I encountered eighteen months ago, and what we are collectively undergoing today. The tiniest, most lowly thing—a mere virus—becomes monstrously huge, as the prodigious leviathan of civilization is reduced to a standstill. Everything is reversed.

Nevertheless, **if we can but shift our perspective and release our fear, to see the world from the bottom up instead of from the top down, we may experience the awesome harmony** of the spheres, even in the midst of our current tribulations. This would be an unprecedented and most welcome transformation of human consciousness.

**“Life is always on the edge of death, always, and one should lack fear and have the courage of life.” —Joseph Campbell**